Make A Wrong One Right

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Make A Wrong One Right

by boasamishipper

Summary

Terrified, Maverick grabs the newspaper off the doorstop and tears the thread off, tearing it open. There's a story about the nuclear reactor that exploded in Ukraine in April, and another about the death of Ted Lyons. Ronald Reagan is the president of the United States, the Cubs beat the Dodgers last night 9-4, and Aliens is the number one movie in America.

The newspaper is the San Diego Union. The date is July 26, 1986.

Maverick clamps a hand over his mouth and barely makes it back in the house in time to fall to his knees and vomit into the toilet.

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Maverick makes a wish and wakes up thirty years in the past. He reacts accordingly.

July 26

Maverick is pretty sure he's dead.

Actually, he's pretty sure he passed dead about three excruciating head throbs ago and is well on the way to decomposing. He hasn't felt this bad since his sophomore year of high school, when his cousin Michael threw a party while his parents were away and dared him to drink the jungle juice his friends had made in the upstairs bathtub. He'd woken up the next day in the backyard in nothing but his underwear, which — naturally — had done nothing to endear him to his aunt and uncle once they found him there, puking in the peonies.

Maybe he *is* too old for this shit now, as Ice would say. Then again, Ice was right beside him and Carole at the bar last night, joining them in keeping their shot glasses full and raising them high to toast Goose's memory. Thirty years had lessened the pain a little, made the grief less sharp when it hit him out of nowhere, but it still hurt sometimes to look in the mirror and find himself the old man that his best friend never got to be.

He doesn't *feel* like the old man he is at the moment — then again, he doesn't feel much beyond the headache and the nausea and the coating of fuzz on his tongue. And then, there, knocking against his ribs, something else. Regret. Guilt. *I wish I could have another day with him,* and *you wouldn't understand, Ice, you* don't *understand,* and the flash of hurt in his husband's eyes before he left early, leaving Maverick and Carole alone at the table with the last bottle of vodka.

Carole must have gotten him home at some point, Maverick reasons, from where his face is half-buried in his pillow. Funny how even his sheets and his pillow feel unfamiliar when he's hungover — the fabric is too smooth, less worn from use. It even *smells* different, and Maverick frowns slightly, confused. Did Ice switch fabric softener brands again?

"Baby." He reaches out, fumbling blindly for Ice's shoulder. "Hey. Did you switch fabric softeners?"

"Go back to sleep, Pete," comes the soft (somewhat irritated) voice, and Maverick's eyes shoot open, his body tensing up so tightly that he can physically feel his muscles straining from his scalp to his toes.

The pounding of his heart against his ribs is the only thing that's keeping him from fainting, because that isn't his husband's voice. He's not in bed with his husband. He's in bed with someone else, a *female* someone else. He can see a lacy bra on the bedspread, a pair of high heels next to the door, and he's under the covers in nothing but his underwear, and his chest is heaving and his left arm is tingling like he's going to have a heart attack.

This can't be real. He would never. He *could* never—

"Pete?" The woman turns over to face him, brow furrowed in confusion, and Maverick's heart stops beating entirely.

“Charlie?”

“Last I checked,” she says, with the same cool amusement she always has when she talks to him. *No.* Had, not has, because the last time they even spoke — on much better terms than the first time they parted — was on Christmas, and the last time they saw each other in person was at the wedding, at *his* wedding, and her hair was shorter and she wore horn-rimmed glasses and flirted with Ice’s sister during the reception and she looked a damn sight older than she does now. “What’s the matter? Did you drink too much last night?”

Last night. She can’t have been with him last night — last he checked she was in the Cayman Islands, posting pictures of the ocean on her private Instagram. Or was it the Bahamas? Either way, she can’t be in Nevada, and she sure as hell can’t be in his bed, looking exactly the same as she did when they first met.

Maverick scrambles out of bed, throwing the covers off himself and taking off down the hall, ignoring Charlie’s confused *Where are you going?* before skidding to a halt in the bathroom. Charlie’s bathroom. This is Charlie’s house, he knows that now. He splashes cold water on his face from the sink, squeezes his eyes shut and reopens them, but nothing changes.

His reflection stares back at him from the mirror, and his stomach gives a painful lurch. Like Charlie, he’s younger. His face is fuller, his hair darker and shorter. The laugh lines around his eyes are gone, as are the creases between his eyebrows. Only his eyes are the same. He hangs onto the sink, nails digging into the porcelain so his legs won’t give out from under him. He’s young again. He’s young just like Charlie is, and this is Charlie’s bathroom, and the last time he and Charlie were young and in the same house was…

No. No, this isn’t real. This can’t be happening.

Maverick throws the bathroom door open and tears down the hall again, knocking past Charlie (wrapped in the silk bathrobe he remembers all too well) on his way to the front door. It’s all just the same as he remembers; the floor to ceiling windows, the hardwood floors, the too-clean furniture and mahogany dining table, the kitchen sink empty of all but two wine glasses.

He pulls the door open and staggers outside, his legs trembling, and then trembling even more as he takes in the sights. He can smell the ocean from the front porch, can see the palm trees swaying in the early morning sun and the civilians with big hair and neon shorts jogging by. His motorcycle’s parked on the driveway — his *old* motorcycle. He crashed that bike fifteen years ago, tore his ACL and got road rash all over his back and stomach and ass in the process. Couldn’t fly for almost a year. Ice bought him a new bike for his fortieth birthday, and he’d carved *I + M* in a little heart on the fuel tank.

Terrified, Maverick grabs the newspaper off the welcome mat and tears the thread off, tearing it open. There’s a story about the nuclear reactor that exploded in Ukraine in April, and another about the death of Ted Lyons. Ronald Reagan is the president of the United States, the Cubs beat the Dodgers last night 9-4, and *Aliens* is the number one movie in America.

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Maverick clamps a hand over his mouth and barely makes it back in the house in time to fall to his knees and vomit into the toilet. Bile burns the back of his throat; his stomach clenches and heaves painfully as he tries to make sense of the impossible. He squeezes his eyes shut again, trying to breathe in through his nose and out through his mouth, wishing Ice was there to put a cool hand on the back of his neck and soothe him through this.

Ice. God.

"I think you should go home," Charlie says, from behind him. He can't see her, but she sounds like she's wrinkling her nose. "You look awful."

Maverick gulps down air, almost coughs half of it back up. "You know," he rasps, "I think that might be a good idea."

Charlie doesn't let him leave until he downs a bottle of water and can walk in a straight line without losing his balance — which, honestly, is a lot more than he expected from her. The her of 1986, anyway, because the her of 2016 isn't all bad, now that they're…well, not friends, exactly. Civil. The kind of civil where they exchange texts on birthdays and holidays and send each other Pinterest moodboards and interesting articles on Facebook. He misses that Charlie.

You'll see her again in thirty years, whispers a snide voice in the back of his mind, and Maverick's heart starts pounding again so badly that he almost crashes his bike into a palm tree.

This isn't real. It *can't* be real. It's all a dream — a very intense, vivid dream. Any minute now he's going to wake up at home, in Nevada, with his husband, in the body of his fifty-four year old self, and blame this hallucination all on his hangover and Carole's insistence on finishing the bottle of Grey Goose they'd bought. Thirty years ago he was a stupid, stubborn kid determined to prove himself to the world if it killed him, and ended up getting his best friend killed instead; he's not—

I wish I could have another day with him.

Maverick hits the brakes.

The motorcycle skids to a screeching halt in the middle of the (thankfully empty) street, nearly sending him flying over the handlebars and onto somebody's front lawn. He plants both feet on the road automatically, his heart racing at a hundred miles an hour and his mind clear for the first time since he woke up in Charlie's bed with a headache the size of Reno.

July 26, 1986. The *twenty-sixth.*

Maverick shoves the clutch lever down and roars off down the street, the houses (and the stop signs) passing by in a blur of color. He's off the bike the second it comes to a complete stop — he might be losing his mind, but the last thing he needs is to end up in a motorcycle accident — and sprints towards the front door. He's debating whether or not he should stop to

knock or just use his shoulder as a battering ram, but the door swings open before he can do either, and a tiny blond blur slams into him and hugs him tightly around the knees.

“Uncle Mav! Uncle Mav!”

Bradley’s grinning up at him. There’s syrup smeared on the corners of his mouth, a napkin tucked into his shirt collar, and he’s clutching the same model airplane that he played with until he was seven and it broke on an ‘underwater expedition’ at a swim lesson. The same model airplane that Maverick bought him thirty years ago.

Maverick’s breath is coming in short, sharp gasps, his chest heaving with the effort to draw enough air into his constricted lungs, and his ears are starting to ring. Is this a side effect of time travel? *Back to the Future* never mentioned this.

“Uncle Mav?” Bradley’s grin starts to fade, and he tilts his head back, frowning. He *tilts his head back.* Because Maverick is *taller than him.* Maverick hasn’t been taller than Bradley since Bradley turned fourteen and grew six inches and also the beginnings of the mustache he still has now. But here Maverick is, taller than Bradley, because it’s July 26, 1986 and his nephew is four years old. “You look funny.”

“C’mere, little buddy, give him a minute to breathe,” and Maverick’s eyes slide back up and over to the door, to the source of the all too familiar laugh. He feels like he’s moving underwater as his eyes finally land on the man leaning against the doorframe, grinning fondly at him. Bradley runs back over to his father, who hoists him up and balances him on his hip. “Hey, Mav. We’ve got leftover pancakes inside if you want some — Carole’s cooking, not mine, so don’t worry.”

Blood is rushing in his ears, a white noise that reminds him all too well of the days he spent in the hospital and in the air afterward, knowing no matter what anybody told him that it was all his fault, that Goose’s blood was on his hands. Of the days that hadn’t actually happened yet.

“Mav?” Goose frowns, concerned, and takes a step forward. “Hey, you okay?”

It’s the last thing Maverick remembers hearing before the ground rushes up to meet him, and everything goes dark.

“Is Uncle Mav gonna be okay?”

“Sure he is, baby. He’s just not feeling good right now, it happens to everybody.”

“Honey, get me another pillow, will you? I think he’s coming around...”

Maverick’s eyes shoot open and he shoots straight up — and knocks his head against someone else’s, sending him right back onto the pile of pillows with a groan. *“Ow.”*

“You’re telling me,” Goose groans, rubbing his hand against his forehead. Bradley’s got his hands over his mouth, and Carole looks like she’s torn between laughing and cooing in

sympathy. “Jesus, Mav. I think you might’ve knocked some of my brains loose.”

“Aww, come here.” Carole presses a kiss to his forehead, and then to Maverick’s. Maverick can’t make himself move to stop her. He can barely make himself keep breathing. “Well, both of you seem right as rain to me. Bradley, come on, let’s see if we can find Uncle Mav some ginger ale and crackers.”

“Okay!”

Bradley scrambles off the other end of the couch and leads Carole into the kitchen, leaving Maverick alone with Goose. With *Goose.* For the last thirty years, he’d have given up a limb for another moment like this, another conversation with his best friend, the chance to share a joke or a smile with him, and now he’s too busy launching himself forward and sobbing into Goose’s shoulder to appreciate any of it.

“Hey.” Goose’s voice is soothing, as steady as his hand on Maverick’s back, but Maverick can hear the undercurrent of *what the fuck is going on* all too clearly. A hysterical, watery laugh tears free, because *God,* can he relate. “Hey, Mav, it’s okay. You’re okay.”

“You’re okay,” Maverick tries to say, but it gets lost in an explosive sob, and he clutches the back of Goose’s shirt tightly to keep his balance, buries his face in the fabric. Jesus, he forgot all about Goose’s fucking Hawaiian shirts, anything that matched Carole’s brightly colored wardrobe. And Goose’s aftershave — not Old Spice but Aqua Velva, the brand coming back to him like he’d never forgotten at all. The years had gone on and on and he’d fucking forgotten everything that made Goose who he was. Who he had been. “God. I’m so sorry, Goose. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Why? What do you have to be sorry for?”

Everything. He chokes on another sob. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Sure I would,” Goose says. “Come on, try me.”

You died thirty years and three days ago and it’s all my fault. I couldn’t take my eyes off the prize and get my head out of the clouds until I lost you and I’ve regretted it ever since. You trusted me to keep you safe up there and I couldn’t, you died because of me and your son grew up without you, I’m so sorry, Goose, I’m so sorry, I wish to God I could have saved you, I wish this was real, I—

But *this* is exactly what he’d wished for, isn’t it?

The thought stills his heart, pauses the flow of tears. Yes. A second chance, another day with Goose, wished for desperately in the parking lot of a bar thirty years from now. The jury’s still out on how real this all is — it’s got to be a dream, a hallucination brought on by all that vodka — but he can enjoy it before everything goes back to normal.

Yeah. A dream. He can work with that.

(Admittedly, Maverick feels a little pang of dismay that Ice isn't right beside him to experience this hallucination, but — well. One miracle at a time. He figures he can manifest his husband into existence later.)

"Mav?"

"Sorry." Maverick's voice is hoarse, and he clears his throat, tries for a wry laugh as he releases Goose's shirt and draws back to look at him properly. The concern has spread its way across Goose's entire face like a bad sunburn. Maverick fights the urge to touch Goose's cheek, his mustache, just to ground himself a little more. "Sorry, I just…sorry."

Ice would have said something like *yeah, you've mentioned,* wry but worried. Goose just waits, like he knows Maverick will tell him whenever he's ready. At this moment, Maverick doesn't know which he appreciates more.

"There's just...a lot going on right now," Maverick finally says, settling on a half-truth that's somehow also the understatement of the century. "TOPGUN, and Charlie, and the competition…" *And this whole thing where you're dead but not yet because I wished for another day with you and somehow got it.*

Goose reads between the lines, somehow, and slings an arm over Maverick's shoulder. Maverick forgot how good he was at that. (At reading between the lines, not hugging. He'd never forgotten the latter.) "Well," he says lightly. "Seems to me the best way to get our minds off things is a day of fun in the sun, and we've got a space in the car if you don't mind Bradley sitting on your lap."

Maverick cracks a smile. "You sure?"

"Hell yeah." Goose offers his palm, and — blinking back a sudden rush of tears — Maverick high-fives him. Just like they used to.

Bradley comes running back into the room with a can of ginger ale clutched between his tiny hands, and plops himself onto Maverick's lap so he can make sure that Maverick finishes the whole thing. Like father, like son. "You okay now, Uncle Mav?"

Maverick rests the still-cool can against his forehead, takes in the sight of his four year old nephew and Carole standing behind Goose, her hands on his shoulders. "Yeah," he breathes. "Yeah, little buddy, I'm okay."

The beach is crowded with people, even for a sunny Saturday afternoon, so it takes an hour to find a parking space (on top of the hour it took them all to drive there). Bradley sits on Maverick's lap the whole time, zooming his airplane around while he babbles and points excitedly at people walking by. Maverick buys an overpriced pair of disposable swim trunks from a kiosk near the public toilets, and lets himself be dragged into the ocean, lets himself enjoy the sun beating down on his back and the sound of Goose and Carole's happy voices in his ears. He carries Bradley around on his shoulders and builds sandcastles with him, joins an impromptu volleyball game with Goose halfway down the beach and trounces the other team, helps bury Carole in the sand while Bradley shrieks with laughter.

Maverick falls back into bantering with Goose like he'd never stopped, exchanging jokes and grins as easy as breathing. Not that it isn't just as easy making Ice smile these days, not after almost twenty-six years together, but he'd missed his and Goose's instantaneous connection — the way that they could nod at each other, raise an eyebrow, and immediately be on the same page. He'd missed *Goose.*

Whatever the reason, he's glad he got to have this dream.

Around one o'clock, Bradley starts asking when they're going to have lunch, so Maverick throws on a shirt and offers to pay for a few burgers from the snack shack by the main parking lot. There's a decent-sized crowd waiting at the counter to order, so Maverick squeezes into an empty space and waits for one of the workers to notice him.

"You come here often, sailor?"

Maverick can't help but laugh at the girl leaning into his personal space and touching his arm, wearing a skimpy orange bikini and a matching floppy hat. He's a little flattered by the attention — she's practically young enough to be his daughter — but he figures he ought to cut this off at the pass before she gets the wrong idea. "I'm sorry to sink your boat, ma'am, but I'm a happily married man."

Her pretty mouth forms a pout. "Funny, I don't see a ring."

Maverick's laugh turns to ashes in his mouth.

Right. July 26, 1986. He's twenty-four, not fifty-four, and he's not married yet. Gay marriage won't be legal anywhere for another twenty years.

Ice doesn't even love him yet.

Funny how much that thought hurts, even though this is all a dream.

He manages to put all of that out of his mind until later that evening, after they all return to Goose's base housing, drinking beer and eating cold pizza, Bradley passed out on the couch from the day's excitement. Carole had left to take a quick shower, wash the ocean out of her hair, and Goose leans forward in his chair, his voice low. "Hey," he says. "How're things with you and Charlie?"

Maverick doesn't choke on his beer, but it's a near thing. "Fine."

"Did something happen between you two last night?"

Maverick reads between the lines this time: *something that would have made you come to my house at eight in the morning looking like the walking dead and cry into my shirt.* He can't blame Goose for asking; if his calculations are correct, last night would have been the day that he took Charlie to meet Goose and Carole and Bradley. The last day he and Charlie had really been happy with each other. "No," he says. "Nothing happened last night, I swear."

Goose nods slowly, unconvinced. "You'd tell me if anything was up, right?"

“With me and Charlie?”

“In general.”

Maverick’s throat locks up. “Yeah,” he says quietly. “Yeah, of course I’d tell you.”

“Alright,” Goose says, and smiles, like it’s that easy. For a long moment, Maverick is tempted to blurt out the whole story, tell him exactly what’s up — that Goose will die because of him in three days’ time, that he hadn’t brought Charlie with him today because he’s from the future and married to Iceman Kazansky, a fact that still rocks him to the core every single day — but he keeps his mouth shut. He’d wanted a day with Goose, and that’s exactly what he’d gotten; no more, no less. He won’t ruin what’s left of it by making Goose think he’s crazy.

The evening winds down after that. Carole leans against Goose’s shoulder, resting her head there; Goose smiles down at her and taps his fingers absentmindedly on the table like he’s playing piano. Maverick keeps mostly quiet, just watches the two of them while nursing his last beer, wishing a little that Ice was there to put an arm around him and hold him close too.

At a quarter past eleven, Maverick hugs Carole goodbye, trying to put a thousand unsaid things into the embrace — *you’ll be alright, I’ll be there for you and Bradley, everything will be okay, I promise* — and Goose walks him to his bike. “Carole wants to drive up to LA tomorrow,” he says. “See the sights, take Bradley to the Hollywood sign.”

“Right.” Maverick remembers that. Goose hadn’t gotten back until early Monday morning, when the morning and afternoon hops had been cancelled because Jester had to take his daughter to the hospital. He’d been pissed about that. He swallows hard, his mouth dry as dust. “Have a good time.”

“I’ll bring you back a T-shirt,” Goose promises, his eyes twinkling, and Maverick’s laugh comes out a little watery. Goose pulls him into a quick hug, and Maverick tries not to cling to him. “See you Monday, Mav.”

“Yeah.” Maverick’s jaw aches from the pressure of keeping his smile on his face. “See you then.”

After a long shower, Maverick turns off the lights and lies back in bed, staring at the shadows on the ceiling. Maybe it’s the beer, or the pizza, or the long day at the beach, but his wish keeps ricocheting in his head like a sunbeam in a hall of mirrors. He’d wanted another day with Goose, and he’d gotten it. One perfect day, full of laughter and warmth.

You can’t change the past, Mav.

I wish I could. I wish I could have another day with him. I wish I could have saved him.

Yeah. Yeah, I know you do.

No, you don’t know. You can’t know. You wouldn’t understand, Ice, you don’t *understand—*

The clock on the wall strikes midnight. Maverick rolls onto his side, closes his eyes, and falls into an uneasy sleep.

July 27

You wouldn't understand, Ice, you don't *understand—*

Goose was my friend too, Maverick. You don't have a monopoly on grieving him.

It's not the same and you know it, Kazansky. He wasn't anything to you like he was to me, or to Carole. You'll never get it like we do.

I can try. If you let me, I can try.

You'll never get it, Ice. You'll never be anything to me like he was.

Maverick remembers the hurt in Ice's eyes, and the hot and heavy weight of guilt he'd felt beneath the white haze of all that vodka. Ice had walked away from him then, told him he'd meet him and Carole at home, that he wouldn't interrupt what he clearly didn't and never would understand. Maverick hadn't been able to find the words then, but he has them now; *I love you, I didn't mean it like that, Ice, I'm sorry,* and Maverick reaches for him—

And falls onto the floor, flat on his face.

The bedsheets have twisted around him like a straitjacket, and his dog tags are tangled and knotted around his neck. Groaning, Maverick untangles himself, and he sits up and rubs his forehead with the heel of his hand. Christ. Good thing he didn't land on one of the cats, otherwise they'd give him the silent treatment for the rest of the week.

Come to think of it, he can't hear the cats at all. They usually start scratching at the door around now, mewling for attention because they know he's a softie. And he can't hear Ice moving around in the kitchen, or smell the coffee wafting up the stairs. Ice hadn't even called up to ask if he's alright; mad or not, Ice wouldn't—

Maverick's heart seizes.

This isn't his bedroom. The twin bed is supposed to be a queen, and the duvet is dark blue instead of moss green. No rug, just hardwood floors. The bedstand boasts an ugly lamp the size of his head and a cracked silver picture frame with pictures of him and his dad, him and Carole and Bradley, him and Goose. No wedding photo. No wedding rings anywhere in sight. No coffee brewing in the kitchen downstairs. No downstairs at all. No cats, and no husband.

Oh God. It hadn't been a dream.

Maverick's glad he isn't standing, otherwise he's pretty sure his legs would have given out from under him. Everything around him is draining away save the blood pounding against his brain, and he clutches the twisted bedsheets in a white-knuckled grip just for something to hold onto.

He'd seen Goose again. He'd spent the day with his best friend and his family, laughed with him and hugged him and hadn't given a damn about the hows or the whys, just took in every second that he could because he thought it would be taken away from him at any moment. And it hadn't been a dream.

The date is July 27, 1986. He's twenty-four years old. Ronald Reagan is the president, the *Challenger* exploded six months ago. Prince Andrew married Fergie last week.

Goose is still alive.

And in two days, he'll be dead.

No. No, no, no. Maverick clutches the sheets even tighter and bites the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood. He draws his knees up to his chest, shaking his head even though there's nobody around to see. *No.* The universe couldn't be that cruel, giving him Goose back just to snatch him away again. He can't live through this again. He *can't.*

I have to go back. The words ground him a little, keep him flailing but still afloat in this ocean of panic. *I have to go back. Forward. Whatever. Anywhere, any* when *that isn't now. I can't be here. I have to go back.*

But if you stay, whispers a tiny voice in the back of his head, *maybe you can save him.*

Maverick's head snaps up.

If he'd known then what he knew now — or *will* know, anyway — he could have taken the shot sooner. He could have stopped himself from flying through Ice's jetwash. He could have saved Goose's life. He *can* save Goose's life. He can make sure Goose lives through the session, that Goose lives to see his and Carole's silver anniversary and Bradley's high school graduation and Maverick's wedding day. He can *save him.*

Maverick is halfway to the door before he remembers he's in his underwear, and that Goose isn't even here to be saved right now. It's ten in the morning; Goose is probably halfway to LA with Carole and Bradley by now, and he won't even be back until tomorrow. *And* Maverick has no way of reaching him because it's 1986 and neither of them have cell phones. Information Age, his ass.

Maverick clutches his dog tags and forces himself to take a breath. Even if he *could* get a hold of Goose now, this isn't something he can just tell Goose over the phone. Or at all. With Maverick's luck, Goose will probably think he's lost his mind. Or, because Goose is too fucking selfless for his own good, he'll believe Maverick but tell him not to bother. That he'd had a good life, and Maverick shouldn't risk throwing a wrench into the space time continuum just for him.

Fuck that.

Okay. So he won't tell Goose. It'll be easier that way; Goose will never know how close he came to dying, or that his death was Maverick's fault. On Tuesday, he'll take the shot first, avoid Ice's jetwash, and change everything for the better. Easy. He can do that.

Except he can't. Maverick might remember every detail of his last day with Goose in too vivid Technicolor, but things will *change* if he suddenly changes the way he flies — and that's the last thing he needs. Ice will be pissed if Maverick just takes off to get a radar lock on Jester by himself. He might get in Maverick's way, try and stop him. He might get hurt, if Maverick gets frustrated and loses sight of his mission. He might — no, no. He refuses to even think about that. He *refuses.*

Maverick sits down on the edge of the bed and buries his hands in his hair, biting his tongue to keep himself from swearing out loud or kicking the wall from frustration. He can see the picture frame out of the corner of his eye, and the sight of Goose smiling up at him just hardens his resolve. He can do this. He *has* to do this.

But he can't do it alone.

He needs his wingman. If this is going to work, he needs to tell Ice everything.

Typically, Maverick runs into problems with his plan almost immediately.

First, he can't remember where Ice lives. He remembers where Ice is *going* to live, where he'd lived when they were instructors — Maverick is damned well able to remember the house where he asked Ice to marry him — but Ice had never invited him to his place when they were students, which presents a fairly fucking insurmountable problem. There's no Internet to look any of this up, and Ice hasn't lived in this neighborhood long enough to get into the White Pages. He guesses he could go to Viper's and ask, but that'd just be inviting more trouble than Maverick's willing to risk, so Maverick spends most of the morning riding around the neighborhood and waiting for Ice to step outside. *Then* one of the neighbors calls the cops on him, and Maverick has to waste time lying to a pair of beat cops half his age — half his future self's age, anyway — that he just needed to clear his head. They tell him bluntly to go and clear his head somewhere else, and don't move their cruisers from the main road for over two hours. So that plan's moot.

Maverick drives by the base, and then the volleyball court by the beach, and then ends up on a park bench grinding his teeth. He wonders if he should drive up to Santa Ana and see if Ice is there, but Ice would probably file a restraining order against him if Maverick just showed up on his parents' doorstep. (Either that or he'd bury Maverick in the backyard, take care of business himself.) Still. He figures Ice wouldn't risk getting stuck in traffic on a Sunday night when he had to be in class at six the next morning. Ice is around here somewhere. The only question is *where.*

The grocery store, library, beach, and every store in the nearby strip mall are all completely empty of Ice. By the time night rolls around, Maverick is exhausted, but he doesn't let that stop him from driving to every single bar and restaurant in the 858 area code. He gets hit on a couple of times, even stops to buy a plate of wings because he's fucking starving, but nobody he talks to has seen a tall handsome blond matching Iceman Kazansky's description, sorry sir.

Maverick wants to kick something. He wishes he could kick himself. He wishes…well, he wouldn't give up yesterday for anything, but he wishes he'd never taken for granted how nice it is to have his husband by his side.

He wants to go home, but he knows he'll just lie there staring up at the ceiling and grinding his teeth. After he refuels his bike at the local gas station — Christ, he can't believe he ever complained about how expensive gas was in the eighties — Maverick parks himself at a booth in the Officers' Club, nursing a Budweiser and a migraine. He peers around the room with little interest, his eyes lingering only briefly on the clock that reads a quarter to midnight. Funny how little this place would change over the next thirty years, even after the Marines take over. Same mood lights, same jukeboxes, same posters and same patrons. The only thing different is him.

Goose is probably asleep now. He probably had a great day with his family. Carole probably took a thousand pictures, and Bradley probably begged for ice cream and to ride on Goose's shoulders for six blocks in the hot sun and fell asleep on the ride back to the hotel. A day full of smiles and laughter, as perfect as the day before. At the moment, none of them know that Goose's time is almost up — or how hard Maverick is working to stop that from happening.

Maverick peels the label off his bottle, organizing all the little wet scraps into a tiny pile. Maybe he can talk to Ice tomorrow, before word gets out that classes are cancelled. Maybe Ice will believe him. Maybe Ice won't. Maybe he won't even listen. Ice didn't even like him yet — why would he, anyway? Maverick's still stunned half the time that Ice loves him, and they've been together now longer than they haven't.

Now. Then.

Whatever.

"—score might be tied, but we've got plenty of time to kick some ass and pull ahead. I've got a good feeling about this, Ice. That plaque's got both our names written on it for sure."

Maverick's heart is jackhammering against his ribs so hard he misses Ice's reply — wry and smooth, no doubt — but he doesn't miss Ice. He's standing in the middle of the crowd, resplendent in his dress whites, his hair neat and his eyes bright, a smile curving his beautiful mouth. He's so *young,* Jesus, but he's just as beautiful now as he is at fifty-six. Always beautiful. Maverick thinks he might cry.

Their eyes catch across the room, and Maverick can't help the whimper that escapes his lips. Can't help the way Ice's expression knifes him through the ribs.

His Ice wouldn't look at him like he's nothing but a nuisance. Like Maverick is just a pebble in his shoe, or a thorn in his side that he couldn't be bothered with.

Maverick knows he should avert his eyes or finish his beer, do something — *anything* but sit there gaping with his mouth half open like a moron, but he can't help it. Ice is so young and so beautiful and the love of his fucking life, and the last time Maverick saw him, he'd hurt him so badly that the taste of regret is still bitter and strong on his tongue.

Ice is heading toward the bar counter now, Slider's arm slung over his shoulders. Without even thinking about it, Maverick abandons his beer and follows them. There are others from his class here tonight, all of whom are staring at him — he probably looks like a homeless

man in his fraying jeans and leather jacket and white T-shirt with a barbeque sauce stain on the chest, but he can't bring himself to give a shit.

Ice's back is to him. He's laughing about something with Slider, waiting for the bartender to return with their drinks. Maverick swallows hard and taps him on the shoulder. "Ice?"

Ice turns in what feels like agonizingly slow motion. It's even more agonizing when Ice doesn't smile at him, or reach for his hand. "Maverick," he says. Even the way he says Maverick's name is unfamiliar. Not unkind, but there's no warmth, no fondness. Just cool politeness, like Maverick is practically a stranger. The pain is so bad that it feels like his stomach is turning inside out and burrowing into his kidneys. "You here with Blackwood, or are you branching out?"

"Neither." Maverick prays his voice isn't shaking as much as he thinks it is. "I'm not…I need to talk to you."

Slider passes Ice his drink — a bourbon neat — and leans against the counter, smirking over his glass. "Sorry, Mav, you'll have to make a reservation at least a week in advance."

"Please." Something flickers in Ice's eyes — surprise? caring? — and Maverick pushes forward. "I need to talk to you. I need your help."

Ice raises his eyebrows, exchanging a smirk of his own with Slider. "And why the hell should I help you with anything, Mitchell?"

"Because you promised you would be there for me," Maverick says. His heart is pounding in his throat, his mouth bone-dry. "When I needed you, you'd be there. You *promised.* Till death do us part."

Slider chokes on his drink. The entire bar seems to drain of sound entirely, like somebody hit the mute button on an otherwise bustling scene. All that's left is the music echoing from the jukebox, which feels almost painfully loud, like it's digging its way into Maverick's skull with white-hot thumbscrews.

Ice is staring at him. His expression is empty of emotion, confusion, anything, and the only clue about what he's feeling is in the fact that he's clutching his drink so tightly that it's a miracle the glass hasn't shattered. Carefully, slowly, he sets it down on the counter, and he grabs Maverick by the shoulder. "Outside," he says quietly, *"now,"* and Maverick doesn't hesitate to follow.

The second Maverick walks through the back door and tastes fresh air again, Ice has him shoved up against the nearest wall, looming over him. Maverick can see Ice's pulse beating at the base of his throat. "Ice—"

"Shut up." Ice's voice is dangerously soft, the kind of tone he only gets when he's really, really pissed off. His hands are shaking where they're pinning Maverick to the wall, his fingers digging into Maverick's jacket. "Whatever game you're trying to play here, Mitchell, it stops now. You get one warning."

“I’m not playing any game, Ice—”

“Then what was that inside? That till death do us part bullshit?”

Maverick takes refuge from his hurt in audacity. “What’s the matter, Kazansky, you don’t know vows when you hear them?”

Ice bares his teeth. “I know what vows are,” he says tightly, like it’s taking everything he has not to punch Maverick in the face. “And I think you’ve got a lot of fucking nerve going in there and saying them to me.”

“You said them to me first,” Maverick retorts, before he can stop himself. “At our *wedding.”*

“…At our wedding.”

“Yes.”

Ice is smiling a little now, like he knows Maverick is full of shit but if Maverick wants to dig himself deeper then he’s happy to watch him do it. “Funny,” he says. “When was that, again?”

“October 21, 2011.”

That takes Ice aback. “That’s twenty-five years from now.”

“I know.” Tears burn his eyes, and Maverick forces himself to blink them back, to stay strong. “I’m from the future.”

All of the fight and anger slowly drain from Ice’s face, replaced by disgust. He lets go of Maverick, and when Maverick tries to take his arm, he shoves Maverick away and storms off. “Look, just stay away from me and keep your delusions to yourself.”

“I’m not lying, Ice!”

“I said *stay away from me,* Mitchell!”

Maverick catches up to him and grabs Ice by the shoulder, forcing him to turn back around. “Listen to me, goddamn it,” he snaps. “Your name is Thomas James Kazansky. You’ve got an older sister named Taylor who’s in the Air Force — she’s a pilot too, her callsign is Molotov — and your parents’ names are Jess and Bill, they’re in the service too. They live in Santa Ana; you grew up there. You’re Jewish on your father’s side, and Presbyterian on your mother’s.”

For a split second, Ice looks unnerved — a crack in the ice cold veneer — before his face smooths out and hardens again. He wrenches his shoulder out of Maverick’s grip, folds his arms over his chest. “What’d you do, Mitchell, ask Blackwood for my file?”

“No.” Maverick recoils, insulted. “I didn’t have to. I know everything about you.”

Another crack. “You don’t know me.”

“I know you,” Maverick says stubbornly, grasping at straws — at *any* straws. “I know you use LA Looks for your hair. I know you were second string on your high school volleyball team and first string for the Annapolis lacrosse team. I know you’re the one who started your family tradition of naming pets after aircraft. I know you’ve got a scar on your upper arm that you say is from flight school but you got it house-training your cat. I know you prefer the left side of the bed and you can’t fall asleep on your back, only on your side. I know that you’ve got a sweet tooth, and your favorite dessert is your grandmother’s chocolate cake. I know you order vodka on the rocks when you’re stressed and a bourbon neat when you’re relaxed. I know that you’ve known you were gay since you were thirteen, and your first crush was Jim Morrison. I know that you love to fly, and going by the book up there makes you feel free, like you can do anything when you’re in control, when you put your mind to it. And I know you feel safer up there when you’ve got a wingman you can trust.” Maverick tries for a smile that ends up more watery than it should be. “And I try my best every single day to be that man for you. In the air and on the ground.”

Ice is frozen where he stands. His arms have fallen to his sides, his gaze fixed on Maverick with such intensity that it makes Maverick shiver. Finally, his lips part, and his breath hitches. “How…” He stops, licks his lips. Clears his throat. “How do you…”

“I told you.” The look on Ice’s face makes him want to cry. “I’m from the future.”

“And you’re my…” Ice swallows, tries again. Maverick wants to take him into his arms and never let go. “You’re my…”

“Husband,” Maverick says firmly, because there’s literally nothing in his life that he’s prouder of being. “Yes.” He reaches out to take Ice’s left hand in both of his own, tracing the spot with his thumb where a ring will be someday, and this time Ice lets him. Or maybe he’s just too stunned to stop him. “Please, Ice. I need your help.”

“To get back to the year 1985?”

Maverick’s laugh comes out more like a sob. “2016, actually.”

“Right,” Ice says quietly. And then, rough but sure: “Yeah. Yeah, Maverick, I’ll help you. Come on.”

July 28

Ice's house is tucked into a cul de sac at the end of the street that Maverick had driven through earlier that day — or yesterday, if the time on his watch is any indication. It's built exactly the same as Maverick's is (one bedroom, a kitchenette, a tiny bathroom, a living room so cramped there wasn't enough room to swing a cat), but everything is much neater, every item in its proper place. The only sign that the place isn't a museum are the books on Ice's nightstand and the assorted plates drying on the rack above the kitchen sink. Maverick wonders if they're the same books that're on the bookshelf in their future living room.

Ice hadn't said much since he gave Maverick his address, other than getting halfway through telling Maverick to take his shoes off before he tracked dirt on the floors only to find Maverick already doing so out of habit. His face had done something strange before he'd gone straight into the kitchen and busied himself with the Mr. Coffee. Maverick had figured that was enough of an invitation to follow, and sat down at the table with his hands folded in front of him like a polite houseguest.

"How do you take it?"

Maverick pushes aside the now-familiar twinge of pain for the third time in an hour. "Black, two sugars."

Ice sets Maverick's cup down in front of him. He doesn't hand it to Maverick, like he does in the future, and he doesn't lean in and kiss him on the temple either. He does hesitate for a split second like he wants to take the seat across from Maverick, but then he turns on his heel and walks back to the counter, leaning against it and holding onto his own cup like it's all that's keeping him upright. Maverick takes a large gulp, grateful that he can now blame the sudden shine in his eyes on his burnt tongue.

"So," Ice says at last, staring into his own cup. He hasn't poured himself any coffee, nor does he seem particularly inclined to. He just keeps twisting the empty cup around in his hands, clockwise then counterclockwise. "How long have, uh…have we been married again?"

"Five years this October," Maverick says, smiling a little just like he does whenever someone asks. The smile drops off his face when he remembers it's Ice asking. "Well, October of 2016, anyway. We've been together a lot longer."

That makes Ice look up. "How long is that?"

Maverick shrugs. "Spoilers."

Ice does not look impressed. "Seriously, Mitchell?"

"Come on, baby, I'm entitled to some secrets, aren't I?" Maverick says — or means to say, anyway, because the second the word *baby* leaves his mouth, the coffee cup drops from Ice's hands and shatters on the floor, the shards just barely missing Ice's feet. Maverick swears and jumps up, shoving his chair back. "Shit, are you okay? Here, let me—"

“No.” Ice’s voice is an octave higher than it should be, and he clears his throat. “No, it’s…it’s okay. Sit down. I’ve got it.”

While Ice sweeps up the pieces into the dustpan (located under the sink to the right of the extra sponges, just like at home) and dumps them into the trash can, Maverick sits back down and makes to fiddle with his wedding ring, only to remember he doesn’t have one. And neither does Ice, because it’s 1986 and they’re not even supposed to like each other yet, let alone be married. He settles for twisting the chain of his dog tags around his finger until the skin starts to purple. “Sorry,” he says, quiet. “I didn’t mean — force of habit. That’s all.”

“It’s fine,” Ice says. It clearly isn’t, because Ice is holding the dustpan so tightly his knuckles are white, but Maverick tries not to take that personally. It’s a lot to take in. He’d be surprised if Ice *wasn’t* wound up tighter than a two dollar watch. “Hey.” His voice softens. “I was just surprised, Maverick. It’s okay.”

“You can call me Mav,” Maverick says, before he can stop himself. *You* do *call me Mav. You only call me Maverick if you’re teasing or mad.* “If you want.”

Ice’s face does this strange little flutter, but his voice is steady when he says, “It’s not your fault, Mav,” and goddamn it if it doesn’t make Maverick’s heart flutter a little too. At least some things never change. Ice puts the dustpan away, and hooks his thumbs through his belt loops. The gesture is so familiar it makes Maverick’s eyes sting. “Have you…been from the future this whole time?”

“What? No, I…only since Saturday. I went to bed in 2016 and woke up here, in Miramar. And thirty years younger.” Maverick smiles, despite himself. “Sorry to say, but I don’t look this good when I’m fifty-four.”

Ice’s lips twitch. “How do I look at fifty-six?”

“Beautiful,” Maverick says, honest. Ice ducks his head, running a hand through his hair to hide his face. Maverick’s pretty sure he’s blushing, and hates himself for making Ice uncomfortable again. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” Ice’s face is slightly pink when he looks back up. “Are we still in the Navy, in the future?”

“Yeah, we are.” Maverick reads between the lines, and nods in response to the unspoken question in Ice’s eyes. “You’re a captain now — so am I. We teach at TOPGUN.”

“Huh.” Maverick can’t tell if Ice is pleased by this idea or not. “What about Bradshaw, what’s he up to?”

Maverick’s throat constricts. “He’s, uh…” His eyes sting, even as his resolve to fix everything hardens again. He clears his throat, and forces out the words. “He died.”

Ice stills. “I’m sorry.” Maverick just inclines his head, unable to speak, and Ice hesitates. “When does he die?”

Maverick swallows hard. “Tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Ice says. That’s all, just *oh,* but quiet, like the word had been punched out of him. Maverick can relate. “How?”

Maverick keeps his gaze down on the half empty cup of coffee, already cooling. If he meets Ice’s eyes now and sees more distant pity than sympathy, he’ll start crying and doesn’t know if he can make himself stop. His voice comes out flat. “Hop thirty-one. Bottom of the ninth, the score’s tied. Two weeks to graduation. Multiple bogeys — we see ‘em at the same time. You didn’t…you don’t take the shot fast enough for me. I get impatient.” His voice breaks. “You break right, and I fly through your jetwash. We have to eject over the ocean.” A sharp inhale. He’s not sure if it had come from him or from Ice. “The canopy, it…Goose broke his neck. We were in the ocean for an hour before someone came to fish us out.”

Mayday, mayday, Mav’s in trouble, he’s in a flat spin, he’s heading out to sea...

“And you…” Ice’s voice is barely steady now. “That’s what you need my help with. You want me to help you save Goose.”

Maverick nods.

“Does Goose know?”

Maverick shakes his head. “I thought about it,” he says, “but I can’t tell him. He…he wouldn’t want me to save him if it meant risking my future.”

“Your future,” Ice says. “With me.”

“Right,” Maverick says, even though this is the first time he’s really thought of the future he’s risking as *his* future. His future in Nevada, with his husband and five cats and a steady job and a house in the suburbs. A future that got to happen because he went back to TOPGUN after the Layton rescue, because he didn’t want to fly combat anymore. Because Goose died.

“What do you think is going to happen if you save him?”

Maverick looks up, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“Tomorrow,” Ice says. He’s got a dishrag in his hands now, and he keeps twisting it like he doesn’t know what to do with his hands. “If I help you save Bradshaw tomorrow, are you going to wake up the next day back in 2016, with him still alive? Will that fix it?”

Maverick hadn’t thought about that. “I don’t know,” he admits. “I still have to try, though, don’t I? I mean, why the hell else am I back here? I can’t just…” *I can’t just watch him die again. Not when I’ve been watching him die for thirty years.*

“What if it doesn’t?” Ice says. His face is blank of all emotion, but there’s an undercurrent of *something* in his voice that instantly puts Maverick on edge in a way he hasn’t been in years. “What if you save Goose and you’re still…you’re still *here,* still like this, the next day? Are you just going to live the last thirty years of your life all over again?”

Maverick hadn't thought about that either. "If I have to, I will," he says. Ice scoffs, and Maverick's irritation swells. "What's so funny?"

"You've seen *Back to the Future,* haven't you," Ice says. It's not a question. "Marty got his parents back together, but when he went back, his entire life was different."

"It was *better*. His parents were fucking miserable before; his *life* was miserable. He fixed the past and fixed his future for the better."

Ice's face hardens, and his fingers flex even tighter on that stupid dishcloth. "Is that what you're trying to do, Mitchell? Fix your miserable future for the better?"

Understanding crashes down on him like a ton of bricks, followed instantly by a tightness in the pit of his stomach. "It's not *my* future I'm trying to fix, Ice—"

"But it's yours you're willing to risk," Ice says. "To give up, if it means saving Goose. Isn't it?"

Maverick doesn't have an answer for that. Ice scoffs again, but when he speaks, his voice is much quieter.

"Saving Goose tomorrow doesn't mean he's never going to die, Maverick. In the air, on the ground, wherever. You can't spend your entire life trying to prevent the inevitable."

Anger flares hot, his guilt instantly evaporating, and he finds himself on his feet again without even remembering standing up and shoving his chair back. "I can fucking *try,* goddamn it," he snaps. "If you were in my shoes, would you just let Slider die when you could do something to stop it? When it was your fault the first time?"

Ice flinches. "If it were me," he repeats, every word, every *syllable* coming out calm and practiced, like he'd picked each one in advance and on purpose, "and I had…a life thirty years from now, a life I was happy in, and I had the chance to see Slider again, I'd take it. I'd want another day with him. But I wouldn't save him if it meant I might lose everything I'd gained along the way. Some things aren't worth the risk."

You can't change the past, Mav, whispers Ice's voice in the back of Maverick's mind, and he shoves it away. "He's got a family," he says, and is horrified when his voice breaks. "You don't think Goose deserves to see his kid grow up? To spend the rest of his life with Carole? To be happy?"

"I'm not saying he doesn't—"

"He deserves to *live,* Kazansky! He deserves to have a fucking *future!"*

"You deserve that too, Mav," Ice says. He doesn't sound angry, just quiet, and whatever retort that Maverick had been about to fire back with dies on his tongue.

He hadn't realized it earlier, but they'd moved closer to each other while they'd been arguing. Ice is directly in front of him now, his eyes glinting in the warm light, still holding onto that

stupid fucking dishcloth. He's close enough to touch, and Maverick would, if he didn't think Ice would flinch away from him. Another risk that outweighs the reward.

"If you think it's worth it," Ice says at last, and his eyes don't leave Maverick's for even a second. "If you think it's worth the risk, I'll help you."

Maverick's eyes sting again. "You will?"

"I said I would," Ice says, not unkindly, and Maverick nods. Even when he first got the idea, he knew Ice would agree to help him if he could. Even if this Ice isn't his Ice, not yet. Maybe not ever. He turns away, and drops the dishcloth in the sink behind him. "Just think about… about what you might have to give up if you try to make a wrong one right."

"Ice," Maverick says, wracked with the guilt that he somehow managed to fuck up all over again, but Ice shakes his head.

"We've got a hop in the morning. You should get going."

"It's going to get cancelled. Jester's got to take his kid to the hospital—"

"Mitchell," Ice says. He doesn't say another word after that, but the tone is clear enough. *I want to be alone right now.*

"Oh," Maverick says. "Right. Okay. I'll…see you tomorrow."

Ice doesn't turn around. "Right."

Maverick has to walk away from Ice then and out of his house before he does something stupid like cry.

The morning and afternoon hops are cancelled, just like last time. Goose is so exhausted from driving back from LA at the crack of dawn that he falls asleep standing up and misses Viper's announcement, and is pissed when Maverick wakes him to tell him the news. Instead of flying, their day is occupied by lectures with information either thirty years out of date or so badly taught Maverick wants to sprint up there and take over himself. He and Ice always make their classes fun — well, Maverick does his best with a well-placed meme now and again to keep things interesting; Ice is the one who's really good at getting his point across while keeping the kids engaged — but this feels like that class from Ferris Bueller on steroids. No wonder Goose keeps dozing off next to him.

Maverick tries to catch Ice's eye all day, but Ice won't even look at him. Ice looks as professional and put-together and ice cold no mistakes as ever, but when he answers one of the instructor's questions, Maverick can hear the dull edge in his voice, even if no one else can. Slider keeps glaring at Maverick when he thinks Maverick can't see, like he knows Maverick is responsible for Ice's bad mood and isn't afraid to fuck Maverick up for it the second he gets some proof.

Get in line, Kerner.

After classes let out — and Ice still doesn't look at or even acknowledge him — Maverick heads to the restroom. It's thankfully empty of both students and instructors, and he leans over the sink, splashing cold water on his face. He'd barely gotten any sleep the night before, just kept tossing and turning. He hasn't slept apart from Ice for more than a couple days in months, and his body — even his younger self — isn't used to it.

He looks at his face in the mirror, and lets out a long breath. Imagines, for a brief moment, what it would be like for him right now if their positions were reversed. Imagines the Ice of thirty years ago, who he'd respected but couldn't stand, cornering him outside the Officers' Club and saying, *Hi, I'm your husband. We've been married for five years and we've been together for much longer. My best friend died because of me, and I need your help to save him. By the way, if you help me save him, it might alter the entire space time continuum even more than I've already altered it by talking to you, so we won't have the life we lived before, the life with you I know and love, but I'm willing to give that life with you up if it means he gets to live. Glad we cleared that up.*

Maverick's shoulders slump.

Fuck. No wonder Ice is upset. He'd be upset too if he found out he had a husband who was willing to give up their future together, even if it was for a good cause.

Maybe he can have it both ways. Maybe he can save Goose, and graduate as a team with him, and transfer to the *Nimitz* after the Layton rescue so he could still be with Ice. And then…and then maybe he can convince Ice to give him a chance, while he makes absolutely sure that Goose won't die because of him, not if Maverick can prevent it. Maybe there will be time for him and Ice to fall in love. Maybe Ice will still choose to love him, just like he will (did? does?) in the future Maverick came from. Maybe it won't be the same future, but he can still learn to love it. Maybe he can have them both.

You can't spend your entire life trying to prevent the inevitable.

"Yes I can," Maverick tells the sink drain, hating the thin note of desperation in his voice. "I can."

I will. I have to. I need to.

Maverick leaves the bathroom as Hollywood and Wolfman come in, and — because his luck is simultaneously amazing and terrible — spots Goose and Ice engrossed in conversation by the stairs. The same place where Ice had waited for him that first day, clasping his watch with cool efficiency and an even cooler gaze. *Who was covering Cougar, while you were showboating with that MiG?*

His husband and his best friend. Both alive, both perfect. The sight makes Maverick want to grin and cry all at once.

"Yeah, he's shooting up like a sunflower," Goose is telling Ice as Maverick approaches, showing him the picture of Bradley he keeps in his wallet. Maverick had forgotten about that. "Carole says he's the spitting image of yours truly, but I see a lot of her there too — hey, Mav, you think Bradley'll be able to pull off a mustache in a few years?"

Maverick feels like Goose's smile is knifing him between the ribs, just like Ice's look did in the Officers' Club last night. "Yeah," he says, his voice carrying a rough edge. "Yeah, he will. He'll look great."

Goose grins, proud. "Damn straight."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Mother Goose," Ice says, and — with the barest second of hesitation — claps Goose on the shoulder politely. His gaze slides to the left, landing on Maverick for the first time all day, and Maverick bites the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood. "Mitchell."

Maverick's heart clenches. "Kazansky."

Ice gives him a tiny nod and a look that Maverick can't quite decipher — and isn't that new, being unable to read the face that he knew almost as well as his own by now — before he walks off down the hall, cool and casual. Maverick doesn't even realize he'd been checking out Ice's ass until Goose clears his throat pointedly.

"Something going on here that I should know about, Mav?"

"I wish," Maverick mutters, and then his face and entire body immediately burn bright red. Son of a bitch. He hadn't meant to say that out loud.

Goose just shakes his head, and…is he smiling? He is. It's a little wary, sure, but it's genuine. "You know I've got your back, Mav, but I think you might be buzzing the wrong tower there," he says, and then lowers his voice. "Just be careful, alright?"

Maverick nods. "I will," he forces out, instead of what he really wants to say: *I love him, Goose, I love him so fucking much, I waited seventeen years to marry him and I never regretted a single second of it and he thinks I do because if I save you the future with him that I know and love might never happen and now I'm afraid to risk that but I don't want to lose you again and I don't know what to do.*

Goose carefully slides Bradley's picture back into his wallet, and leans back against the railing. "You want to grab a drink?"

Make that a stiff one. "Yeah," Maverick says. His head is throbbing; if he thinks any more about the future today it might come off at the dotted line. How did Marty McFly ever do it? "Yeah, that'd be great."

Goose takes him to the same hole in the wall bar where Maverick introduced Charlie to Carole and Bradley. It's surprisingly crowded for a Monday afternoon, so at least every third seat at the bar counter is taken. The piano is unoccupied, as are most of the servers, so they get their food and drinks in no time at all.

Someone slides a quarter into the jukebox next to their table, and Cyndi Lauper starts crooning *Time After Time.* Maverick is not amused at the coincidence, and is even more determined not to let that show on his face. "How was LA?"

“Lots of fun. Carole brought her Kodak and took a photo every second we stood still, and Bradley got a pair of sunglasses and a few new shirts. I’ll show you all the photos when we get them developed.” Goose grins, content. Maverick hadn’t noticed it earlier — either in this timeline or the previous one — but he looks tanner than usual. The three of them must’ve been outside all day. “What’d you get up to while I was gone? You stay out of trouble?”

“Depends on what you classify as trouble,” Maverick says, and Goose laughs. “Uh, nothing really. Drove around. Got some sunshine. Went to the O Club for a little while.” *Saw my husband who isn’t my husband yet.* His stomach twists.

“You talk to your lady friend at all?” Goose says. Off Maverick’s *what the fuck are you talking about* look, he clarifies, “You know, Charlie? Miss *She’s Lost That Loving Feeling?”*

“Oh,” Maverick says. “Oh, uh, no. Pretty sure that ship sailed.” He feels a little guilty for giving Charlie the cold shoulder — she’d tried to catch his eye on the way into class today, but he’d pretended he hadn’t seen — and knows he owes her some kind of explanation for the way he’s been acting. He’ll talk to her as soon as he comes up with an explanation that doesn’t make him sound crazy.

“Ah. Want to talk about it?”

“No thanks.”

“Alright then,” Goose says simply, and steals one of Maverick’s onion rings off his plate, swishing it through a puddle of mustard. Maverick can’t help but smile. He’d forgotten Goose used to do that too. “Never thought she was good enough for you anyway, if you ask me. You deserve somebody who makes you happy just being near them.”

“I know.” God, does he know.

Time After Time fades to a close, and *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* starts. Maverick grins, despite himself. *This* song he remembers quite happily from his and Ice’s bachelor party, when Hollywood and Wolfman had signed each other up for karaoke and ended up singing a surprisingly good (considering how drunk they were) rendition of *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.* Ice had laughed so hard he cried, and Maverick had offered to sing him something too. “I’ve been told I’m practically an honorary Righteous Brother.”

“I’m already marrying you, you know,” Ice had said back, his cheeks flushed and his hair mussed, the collar of his shirt popped open. He’d never looked more beautiful. “You don’t have to woo me, Mitchell.”

“Try and stop me,” he’d shot back, grinning, and Ice had pulled him onto his lap and kissed him.

“Stop me if this counts as talking about it,” Goose says, startling Maverick out of his memories. “But are you okay?”

A rush of self-loathing hits Maverick so hard he almost pukes. Jesus. Thirty years of wishing he could have Goose back, and now with his best friend in front of him all he can think about

is Ice. Some friend he is. “Do you ever…” He hesitates. He won’t tell Goose the truth of his dilemma, but maybe he can be subtle. “You know *Back to the Future?”*

“The movie?” Goose’s eyes narrow, like he knows damn well Maverick’s internal crisis does not revolve around the 1985 classic, but he nods. “Sure, yeah. We saw it together, remember? At that drive-in in Pensacola Beach?”

“Right.” Maverick smiles at the memory, but it falters after a moment. “Do you think…do you think Marty ever regretted getting his parents back together?”

Goose frowns. “If I remember right, he kind of *had* to get them back together. His whole existence was in the balance.”

“No, I remember that. I just…” Maverick bites his lip, tries to find the right words. “He must be happy that they’re happier now, but…do you think he ever misses the future he grew up in? Do you think he regrets that he intervened?”

Goose takes his time thinking about that, for which Maverick is grateful. If Goose thinks he’s lost it, it doesn’t show on his face. “I don’t know,” he says at last. “I mean, he might have regretted it if *everything* in his life changed because of that choice. But he still had his siblings, his parents, that same house. Same girlfriend. The Doc was still his friend. If his 1985 was a whole different world, even if his parents were happier, I wouldn’t blame him for having some regrets.” He rests his elbows on the table, lost in thought. “He’d probably regret it if he could’ve done something and didn’t, though. I guess it’s a double-edged sword that way. All a matter of what you’re willing to risk. Or give up, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Maverick says. There’s a lump in his throat. “Yeah, I think so too.”

Goose nudges him under the table, smiling slightly. “Hey,” he says. “This is too heavy to think about, Mav. It’s above our pay grade. All we gotta do is take everything one day at a time, and we’ll be at graduation with our names on that plaque before we know it.”

Maverick blinks back tears, but his grin — surprisingly — isn’t all that forced. “Yeah,” he says. “You bet we will.”

Maverick spends a lot of time that night staring up at the ceiling, watching the time tick by, bringing him closer to July 29, 1986 and a choice that he really doesn’t want to make. There are too many risks and possibilities, too many questions and not enough answers.

If he saves Goose tomorrow, will he wake up in 2016 on July 30th with only that detail changed, or will he be stuck in this timeline forever? If he gets stuck here, will the stars align for Ice to fall for Maverick again under completely new circumstances, to decide Maverick is worth loving? Will Maverick ever be able to look at this younger version of Ice without seeing the husband he’d argued with and left behind? Even if everything aligns, will he ever be truly happy knowing all that he had given up?

And if he doesn’t save Goose, what then? Will the universe right itself, and send him back to 2016? What if it doesn’t? Will he be able to relive the last thirty years of his life knowing that

he let Goose down again, that he could have saved him? Will this Ice ever love him knowing that he killed his best friend on purpose?

If he returns to his present, with Goose dead because of him twice over but everything else the same as he'd left it, will anyone be aware of what he had almost changed? Will his Ice know what he'd done?

All I wanted was another day with him. I didn't want this.

Maverick buries his face into his pillow, and draws his blankets over his head just as his tears start to fall.

I wish I didn't have to choose.

July 29

Maverick wakes at the crack of dawn, though as his eyes slide open he's not sure he even managed to get any sleep at all. His vision blurs when he blinks, and his back aches when he bends over to pick his uniform off the floor. Classes won't start for another two hours, and he won't be in the air for another hour after that. Still, he puts his uniform on with numb fingers and walks out the front door in a daze, ignoring his bike, not stopping until he arrives on base.

The mess hall is nearly empty, and he pours himself a cup of coffee, and then another. Slowly, the mess fills with students and instructors; Sundown and Chipper nod hello at him, but Maverick doesn't have the strength to nod back. Soon, Goose will come running in through that door too, toast crumbs around his mouth and his shirt half-buttoned up, and Maverick will have to smile like nothing's wrong. He'd been good at that back then — still is, really, even if his husband usually sees right through his attempts — but he'd never had to pretend with Goose before. And never about something like this.

Maverick rests his elbows on the table and puts his head in his hands, his fingers rubbing at his aching temples. *Please,* he thinks, not aiming the thought at anyone in particular but hoping for an answer anyway. He closes his eyes to help the thought along. *I'm never one for following orders, but I'll take one this time. A suggestion. A sign. Anything. Please.*

"Maverick?"

Maverick lifts his head.

Ice is standing across from him now, on the other side of the table. He studies Maverick from behind his mirrored aviators, his hands in his pockets; not for the first time, Maverick wishes he had Ice's ability to be cool under pressure. Even if he doubts Ice had ever had to deal with the pressure that Maverick's drowning under right now. "This seat taken?"

Maverick gestures, and Ice sits, takes off his aviators, and — Christ. Maybe it's the lack of sleep, maybe it's just his forthcoming decision clawing him apart from the inside, but the concern in Ice's eyes makes hot tears spring to Maverick's own. He quickly wipes them away with the heel of his hand, tries for a smile. *I miss you,* he thinks, but says instead quietly, "Hi."

"Hi." Ice doesn't smile — or, thankfully, ask if he's okay. That saves Maverick having to lie to him, and the answer's probably clear enough anyway. "Listen…about the hop."

Maverick's stomach lurches. "Yeah?"

"I know…I know I didn't take the shot fast enough last time." Ice keeps his voice low and his expression unreadable, almost bored. They could be talking about anything — the weather, volleyball, the Dodgers lineup. "But I will this time. Tell me when to fire, and I'll do it."

The unspoken *and Goose can live* hangs between them like a cartoon anvil, and Maverick feels like he's already been flattened. He'd remembered Ice had said he would help him, but this…one word from Maverick, and Ice will take the shot early. He and Goose will lose the hop, but Goose won't lose his life. Three days ago, he would have fallen on this opportunity without thinking twice about it.

Now, though…

Just think about what you might have to give up if you try to make a wrong one right.

Maverick looks at Ice's bare ring finger, and tries to convince himself this is the right move. He'd wanted an answer, a sign, and this is as clear of one from the universe if any. One word from him, and Goose will live another day. *And if me and Ice are meant to be, we'll work out somehow. It'll all work out.*

Won't it?

If Ice notices where Maverick's gaze and thoughts have gone, he makes no indication of it. He just nods once, a barely there motion. "Just thought I'd let you know," he says. They could be talking about almost anything again. He rises, wiping his hands on his pants, and gives Maverick the same look he'd given him in the hall yesterday afternoon. Was this what Ice had been trying to tell him? "See you in the sky, Mitchell."

Maverick's voice comes out steadier than he'd expected. "Count on it, Kazansky."

Goose arrives right as Jester starts herding them toward the locker rooms, and for the next half an hour, through showering and changing into his flight suit and ignoring Hollywood and Wolfman's dirty jokes, Maverick manages to act like nothing is the matter. He keeps his smile firm on his face until Goose can't see him anymore, right when they're going through the preflight checklist. He hadn't really thought about it at the time, but *damn* had it been easier going from a Tomcat to a Super Hornet than it is the other way around. The cockpit feels smaller, cramped; though maybe that's just Maverick's anxiety rearing its ugly head again, forcing him to go over the plan once more.

1. Avoid suspicion at all costs.
2. Get in the air.
3. Get Ice to take the shot.
4. Get Goose back to the ground safely.
5. Rinse and repeat until graduation (and/or retirement).

For the first real plan Maverick has ever made in his life, it's pretty damn good. Simple. Easy to follow, easy to execute.

Then why does he still feel like he's doing something wrong?

"Everything okay, Mav?"

Maverick startles so hard that he almost jumps out of his own skin. "What?"

“You haven’t said anything in five minutes,” Goose says. Maverick can practically feel Goose’s concern drilling a hole into the back of his head. “Is there something up with the plane?”

Great. So much for sticking to the plan; he’s already flunked the first step. “No, sorry.” He clears his throat, forces the smile back on his face even though Goose won’t see it. “Uh, everything’s good here. You ready?”

“Sure am,” Goose says, easily. Then, like usual, he leans forward and grips Maverick’s shoulder, a silent *you and me, Mav, always.* Maverick rests his hand on top of Goose’s, and blinks back a sudden wave of tears.

“Alright,” he says. “Let’s do this.”

For the first time in his life, Maverick keeps his eyes on the stretch of sky in front of him. If he focuses too hard on the words he’s heard before (not just once but hundreds of times, in every nightmare he’s had since), he’ll puke up the three cups of coffee he had and throw an even bigger wrench into the space time continuum.

“You ready for this one, Maverick?”

Ice’s voice floats over through the comms, and Maverick’s fingers unclench ever so slightly on the controls. His tone might be the same, but Maverick reads between the lines like he didn’t know how to last time — *it’ll be okay, I’m here, say the word, I’ve got your back.* “Just a walk in the park, Kazansky.”

“Contact, multiple bogeys,” Slider announces, his voice a little staticky, and every single one of Maverick’s organs contracts in preparation. Here we go. “One-six-five, two miles. Looks like they’re going away from us.”

“I see them,” Maverick croaks, and clears his throat, tries again. Even his eyelashes are sweating now. “I see ‘em. Right, tally-ho, two o’clock. I’m in.”

“I’m in,” Ice retorts, and then they’re both breaking right, chasing the bogeys through the canyon as the sun rises in the east, casting everything in a terrifyingly familiar creamy orange glow. Luckily for him the last thirty years have taught him to fly like it’s all second nature, because he can’t concentrate on anything, not even on complaining when Ice cuts him off, just like last time.

Goose is swearing up a storm behind him. “Jesus Christ, Ice. Take the shot and get the hell out of there! Mav, we could’ve gotten it from right here!”

Maverick can’t speak, can’t move. Just keeps flying, happy — for the first time all of competition — to follow Ice’s lead.

Tell him to fire or clear. He’ll fire, and Goose will live. Do it. Tell him. Tell him now.

“Ice, what’re you doing?” Maverick can hear Slider demanding. “Take the shot, he’s right there!”

Goddamn it.

“Ice,” and Maverick can barely recognize the words as they leave his mouth, they sound so fucking wrong, why does this feel so fucking *wrong,* “fire or clear.”

“I’m switching to guns,” Ice says, without hesitation, and Maverick knows — deep down, in the part of his brain that isn’t engulfed in an inexplicable amount of terror — how difficult this must be for Ice, to skip steps and jump ahead, to land the shot that isn’t technically perfect. But because Goose’s life is the balance — because Maverick, his rival, had come to him and begged him for help — Ice is going to do it.

And in the split second that that realization lands, Maverick swears he can see in the open blue sky the two futures before him, as clear as a fork in the road. A future where Goose lives and everything changes, and the future that Maverick had come from. The happy ending that he sometimes still didn’t believe he deserved, not after everything, but the one he’d fought so hard for anyway.

He can risk it. He can take the chance, and create something new. The opportunity is at his fingertips, close enough to touch. He wants the chance at that future, that perfect happy ending with Goose alive and Ice by his side, so badly his entire body aches. God, does he want it.

But that’s all it is: a chance.

And he can’t risk everything he’d gained along the way to get it.

I’m sorry, Goose.

“Come off my right, Ice, I’m in!”

“I’m off — shit!”

“Mav, we’re in his jetwash — shit, this is not good, *this is not good!* We’ve got a flameout; engine one is out, engine two is out!”

It already happened, Maverick thinks. He feels like he’s floating above his own body, distant from the nauseating spinning of the aircraft and the even more nauseating sound of Goose’s terrified screaming. *It can’t hurt you. It happened already. It can’t hurt you.*

“I’m losing control,” *I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m so sorry Goose I’m sorry,* “Goose, I can’t control it! It won’t recover — shit!”

I’m sorry, Goose, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.

“Mayday, mayday,” comes Ice’s voice, and is it Maverick’s imagination, or has his ice cold veneer cracked again, allowing the barest hint of panic to seep through? He hadn’t noticed that last time. Is this new? “Mav’s in trouble, he’s in a flat spin, he’s heading out to sea…”

Heading out to sea is an understatement — the sea is heading up to them, the water coming closer and closer with every second, every heartbeat in time with Goose's frantic reading of the altitude, *eight thousand, seven thousand, six thousand, six, Mav, we're at six!* Gravity is shoving him down onto the controls, bending him ruthlessly forward while the ejection handle stays out of his reach and bile climbs up his throat.

"I'm pinned forward, Goose! I can't reach the ejection handle, you're going to have to punch us out! Eject, Goose, eject!"

"I'm trying!"

"Eject, Goose, eject — *watch the canopy!"*

The canopy pops off, and now Maverick's flying, flying up and up and up while the plane spirals and smokes and crashes into the waves below. The impact had knocked the wind out of him, preventing him from screaming, but he can still feel the wind whipping around him as the breeze cradles him and carries him gently down. Can still feel his back and chest and lungs and heart aching, can feel the salty tear tracks drying on his cheeks even as new tears fall.

Can still hear, in past and recent memory, again and again and again, the terrible *snap* of Goose's neck breaking on impact.

Maverick clutches Goose's body close to him, buries his face in Goose's shoulder, and waits for the Coast Guard chopper to take them back to shore. His shoulders heave from the force of his sobs.

I'm sorry, Goose. I love you. I'm so sorry.

The world is a white haze, too bright, too loud, and Maverick squeezes his eyes shut, trying not to gag on the sharp-smelling air. Something keeps beeping, footsteps echo from far away. A hand touches his wrist; a familiar one. "Go back to sleep, Pete."

"Oh god not again," Maverick says, but it all comes out in a jumbled mess, and honestly, that might be for the better. Charlie's smile is tinged with pity, but there's some sympathy there too. Everything comes roaring back, and for a split second, he dares to hope. "Goose?"

Her smile falters, and that tells him all he needs to know.

They let him out of bed to shower, and bring him something to change into. He's standing in front of the mirror in his underwear, splashing hot water on his face just to feel something, when Viper walks in, crisp and put-together in his dress whites. Viper's voice is grave, the cadence smooth. *You fly jets long enough, something like this happens. My squadron, we lost eight of eighteen aircraft. Ten men. First one dies, you die too. But there will be others. You can count on it. You gotta let him go.*

Funny. The speech hurts more this time around.

Maverick is pretending to be asleep so his nurse will leave him alone when the knock comes at the door. He listens to the tap of her shoes against the hardwood floor and the squeak of the door, straining to hear who she's talking to. Whoever it is sounds pissed.

"You said you would let me see him once I got out of the debrief; it's done, I'm here—"

"Visiting hours ended thirty minutes ago, Lieutenant," the nurse says, and Maverick's eyes pop open. "Unless you're a spouse or a relative, I can't let you in until tomorrow morning."

"Let him in," Maverick croaks, and the whispers immediately stop. The nurse says something Maverick can't make out, but the next thing he knows, she's left them alone and Ice is taking the plastic chair that Charlie had vacated earlier that morning and dragging it closer to the bed. He's in his Class Bs, the same one he was wearing this morning, but his hair is oddly flat, like he hasn't had the chance to comb it since he got out of his plane.

Maverick props himself up on his elbows, to be polite. "Hi."

"Hi." Ice looks like he has a thousand things to ask, each question more pressing than the last. Eventually, he clears his throat and settles on, "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." His tongue feels thick, and there's a burning, prickling feeling in the inner corners of his eyes. Goddamn it. He blinks and stares up at the ceiling, hoping Ice can't tell. "Just need some rest, ibuprofen and plenty of fluids. They'll let me out of here in a few hours. I'll be okay."

A careful pause. "Is that what your doctors told you?"

"No." Now the burning feeling is in his throat too. "I remember from last time."

Slowly, hesitantly, Ice takes Maverick's hand in his own, rubbing his thumb over Maverick's knuckles without saying a word. Maverick swallows, his throat too tight for speech, and digs his teeth into his trembling lip to keep back the howl of misery and grief, old and new, that's clawing at him.

"I'm sorry, Mav," Ice says softly, and Maverick feels himself break.

"I wanted to save him." He's crying so hard that his entire body is trembling now, his chest heaving for air, and throughout it all, Ice is still holding Maverick's hand, squeezing it tightly, anchoring him to the earth. "I wanted to save him, I wanted to save him so bad—"

"I know," Ice whispers. "I know, I'm sorry."

Maverick sobs, and Ice lets go of his hand — *wait no don't don't leave me* — and leans forward to embrace him. Part of him feels a little bad, because Ice had clearly intended for this to calm Maverick down a little, but the second Maverick smells Ice's cologne and feels Ice's hand tentatively cup the back of Maverick's head, he clings to the back of Ice's shirt like a lifeline and cries even harder.

Goose is dead, but Ice is here.

At least this time he isn't alone.

He's not sure how long they stay like that, but it's long enough for Maverick to cry himself back into a state of boneless exhaustion. Ice's back must be killing him — half standing half kneeling over someone and hugging them cannot be a comfortable position — but he doesn't complain once.

Finally, Maverick makes himself let go and move away, and wipes his eyes on the back of his hand. Ice sits back down, and Maverick inwardly winces at how rumpled his shirt is. He's pretty sure there's a snot stain on the shoulder. "I think I ruined your uniform."

"I'm sorry," Ice says, and Maverick blinks, temporarily thrown.

"...You're sorry that I ruined your uniform?"

"No," Ice says, two parts serious and one part exasperated. He's looking at Maverick like it's taking everything he has to maintain eye contact. "No, I…" He stops, clears his throat. "I didn't take the shot fast enough."

Maverick's heart constricts. "It's okay."

"No it isn't," Ice says, heated, and Maverick wonders if Ice has been beating himself up about this since Maverick flew through his jetwash. The thought makes his heart constrict even tighter until he thinks it might burst. "I could have — if I'd done better, I could have…I could have helped you save him. I—"

"I did it on purpose," Maverick says.

Ice stops. "What?"

"I…" Maverick swallows hard. God, he hopes nobody is around to hear him — especially not Carole and Bradley. "You did everything right. I was going to let you take the shot, like we talked about."

Ice's voice is barely audible. "But?"

"But…" Now Maverick has to force himself to meet Ice's eyes. "I didn't…it wasn't just a choice between letting Goose live or…it was about my future, a choice between my future and a new one. And I didn't want to risk everything I gained along the way, just for the chance of something better."

"Your future," Ice says. "With me."

"Right."

"You…" Ice's voice is steady, but his face, his eyes — Maverick feels his own throat tighten. He feels like he's staring directly into the sun. "You…chose your future with me, over…"

"Yes," Maverick says, before Ice can even finish his sentence. "Yes. Always."

Ice opens his mouth, and closes it again when no sound comes out. Finally, he reaches for Maverick's hand again, lacing their fingers together, and Maverick squeezes back. There's a thousand unsaid things in that touch, on both of their ends, but…it's promising. Not love, not yet, but Maverick will take it.

Maverick checks out AMA. The necessary paperwork takes half an hour to track down and another half hour to fill out — the nurse drags Viper into his room in the hopes that his presence will make Maverick change his mind, but he seems strangely proud of what Maverick's doing. Maybe he's taking it as a sign that Maverick listened to his pep talk about letting go. Had he thought the same when Charlie talked Maverick into signing out AMA the first time around too?

He has to leave the hospital in an orderly-pushed wheelchair, which is humiliating. Ice is waiting for him in the parking lot, which makes the humiliation worth it.

"Slider mentioned he was getting everyone together at his house," Ice says, which makes Maverick tense up. The last thing he needs right now — besides coming face to face with Carole and Bradley; he'd pretended to be asleep when they came by earlier because he'd known he'd crack like an egg and spill the whole story if he so much as met Carole's eyes — is being in the same room with everyone, stuck under their pitying gazes like a butterfly under a microscope. He'll have enough of that in the days to come. "I figured I'd have a quiet night in. Get my mind off…everything."

"Got room for one more?"

Ice smiles.

The ride to Ice's place is short, and the wait for their dinner is even shorter. Ice had a collection of takeout menus stacked neatly on the kitchen counter, and he'd let Maverick decide what to order. The La Herencia logo had stared up at him, and Maverick had swallowed hard, remembering their first real date — the atmosphere, the margaritas, how nervous he'd been. He'd spent over an hour at the flower shop agonizing over the right bouquet, and then hadn't had anywhere to put it until he took Ice home after. Neither of them had remembered to put the flowers in water until the next morning.

Maverick had handed Ice a menu for the local Thai place instead.

They spend the evening on the couch in front of Ice's tiny television, eating out of the plastic containers while the Giants play the Dodgers. Maverick wonders if Carole and Bradley are home now, if Viper and Jester are looking after them like they had the first time around. If Carole and Bradley are watching the game now to distract themselves from the pain. Bradley loves baseball; he'll be starting Little League in the fall, and Carole had promised to mail Goose hundreds of photos of their son in uniform. And now, because of Maverick twice over, Goose will never get to see them. Never get to see his son grow up.

The sound abruptly cuts out. Maverick looks to his left, confused, and sees Ice holding out a napkin. He takes it with a hand that only shakes a little, and wipes his face slowly, carefully. Funny. He hadn't realized he'd been crying again.

“Thanks,” he says, quietly. He drops his gaze and folds the napkin into a square, and then another, tinier one, until it’s the size of his fingernail. “Sorry. I’ll be okay.”

“I know,” Ice says. And then, “Mav.”

Maverick looks back up.

Ice has moved closer to him. There’s barely an inch of space between them; his container of pad thai is off his lap, now on the edge of the coffee table with no napkin underneath it. He’s putting up the same confident front as always, but Maverick knows how to read between the lines, look for the cracks in the veneer. He’s nervous. Vulnerable. “I’m sorry I’m not him.”

Maverick doesn’t have to ask who he means. “Don’t be,” he says. Ice’s hand is resting on the inch of couch cushion between them. Maverick covers it with his own. Ice’s hand twitches, but he doesn’t move it away. “You’re still you. That’s all I need.”

Ice’s throat bobs. “What happens from here?” he says, still soft. “Will what you did take you back to your future?”

“I don’t know.” He remembers his Ice saying, *You can’t change the past, Mav,* and wonders if the universe took his denial and his wish as a personal challenge. You can’t change the past without changing the future. He knows that now. Will the universe right itself so he can go back? “I hope so.”

You’ll never be anything to me like he was, he remembers saying, and his stomach twists. They’ve been together for twenty-five years, through thick and thin and in sickness and in health, and Maverick’s said all sorts of shit he didn’t mean when they were arguing, but he’s never said anything like that to Ice before. Is there a limit, the part of him that’s still twenty-four and lonely and scared wonders, on how many times he can be terrible to Ice before Ice has enough and realizes he deserves better?

He doesn’t notice the tear trickling down his cheek until Ice reaches out tentatively to brush it away with the pad of his thumb. He doesn’t move his hand after, just keeps his hand right where it is, cupping Maverick’s cheek gently.

Maverick aches for him.

“Ice,” he whispers, and Ice leans in and kisses him.

Ice’s lips are warm and soft and so familiar that Maverick almost whimpers, and he melts into the kiss, into Ice’s touch. He hasn’t kissed his husband since July 29 thirty years from now, before their fight but after Carole’s story about Goose and Bradley that made them all cry laughing, and he feels like he’s aged a lifetime since then — if only in reverse.

Ice draws back eventually and removes his hand, leaving Maverick’s cheek hot and cold at the same time, somehow. “Hey,” he says. He looks a little flustered, which is frankly adorable (and makes Maverick feel all too pleased; not bad at all for a second first kiss), and his eyes gleam the way they do whenever he feels content, relaxed. Maverick’s entire body warms at the sight. “You’ll be okay, Mav.”

“I know,” Maverick says. *As long as I have you, I will be.*

The game runs late into the night, with the Dodgers beating the Giants four to two. Maverick slowly stands up from the couch, his back aching — wonderful how *now* his body decides to feel like he’s fifty-four again. “I should go,” he tells Ice, who nods.

“You could stay,” Ice says, casual in a way that doesn’t fool Maverick for a second. “If you wanted.”

A lump forms in his throat. He really hadn’t wanted to be alone, but hadn’t known how to ask. “Yeah,” he rasps. “That’d be nice.”

Ice lets him use his shower, and when Maverick comes back out, clad in his underwear and T-shirt and his hair slightly damp, Ice is already in bed. The lamp casts a warm glow in the otherwise dark room, and Maverick is about to ask if Ice has any spare blankets when Ice visibly steels himself, swallowing hard, and then lifts his comforter up and moves to the left side of the bed.

It takes literally everything Maverick has not to cry this time. Any more tears and he feels like he might just turn into drops. “You don’t have to do this, Ice.”

Ice shakes his head. “I know,” he says. “I’m not him, but…I can give you this much.”

Maverick’s eyes burn. He knows how much effort it’s taking Ice to do this, knows that intimacy and trust go hand in hand for him and neither are something Ice just hands out at random. But he’d sensed what Maverick needed, and even though this Ice isn’t his Ice, he’s still offering.

Maverick thinks he could relive the past a thousand times and still never deserve the man before him.

He slowly crosses the distance between them, leaving room for Ice to change his mind, and crawls under the covers, tucking himself into Ice’s side, knee to knee. Just like they always lay together. Or will, someday.

Ice switches off the lamp, and the room is cast in darkness. For a long time, neither of them speak. Maverick is beginning to wonder if Ice fell asleep already when Ice whispers, “Tell me something about the future.”

“There aren’t any flying cars,” Maverick says, and Ice snorts.

“I meant something about your future, Mitchell.”

Maverick pauses, mentally shuffling between the significant and the insignificant. “We’re happy,” he says at last. He wants to tell Ice everything — about their cats, their house, the view out their bedroom window and how they’re still each other’s wingman every day on the job — but figures that this is enough, for now. He doesn’t want to spoil the surprise. “We have a good life.” *And I wouldn’t trade it or you for anything.*

You deserve somebody who makes you happy just being near them, Goose had told him yesterday, and Maverick's heart clenches.

Wherever Goose is now, Maverick hopes he understands.

"I look forward to it," Ice says lightly, and nudges Maverick's knee with his own. And that's not nothing either. It's the promise of possibility — the possibility that, if the universe doesn't right itself and take Maverick back to the future, Ice could love him if Maverick gives him enough time. He'll take that too.

The idea hits him right as his eyelids start to droop, long after Ice's breathing has evened out. He climbs out of bed, careful not to wake Ice, and makes his way to Ice's side, where the nightstand is. The pile of books from yesterday is still there. Sure enough, Maverick recognizes some of the titles from their living room bookshelf.

He picks up *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and rifles in the drawer for a pen. Holding the book up to the moonlight coming in through the window until his eyes adjust, Maverick flips to the back, uncaps the pen with his teeth, and scrawls *You're worth any risk, Ice* on the page.

If he's not here in the morning — if he gets to go back to his future — he needs Ice to know that. That he's worth every risk and more.

The clock strikes midnight.

Satisfied, Maverick returns to bed, pulls the covers over himself, and falls into a dreamless sleep.

July 30

Maverick is pretty sure he's dead — or, given the way his head is throbbing like someone smacked it over a volleyball net a few too many times, at least halfway there. His stomach is roiling and his throat aches almost as much as his back, and he groans into what he hopes is a pillow as he vows never to touch a drop of alcohol ever again. All the ibuprofen and coffee in the world won't be able to put a dent in this one.

He can feel the soothing rumble of one of the cats purring next to his stomach, and senses another perched nearby, watching him. Usually he likes it when the cats are on the bed with him to cuddle — if he and Ice aren't occupied with one another, that is — but he can't concentrate on them now. He can't shake the feeling that, for whatever reason, all the vodka he'd drank last night had recently been the least of his concerns.

Last night.

You'll never get it, Ice. You'll never be anything to me like he was.

Maverick's eyes shoot open and he shoots up — and instantly regrets the sudden movement, gripping his head with both hands and trying his best to catalogue his surroundings through eyes half-squinted shut. MiG-25 casts him an affronted look for interrupting her beauty sleep before leaping over to join SR-71 on the coffee table.

The coffee table. He's — on the sofa, covered in a red knitted blanket, and he's still in his clothes from last night…only he has the funniest feeling that he didn't wear these to bed last night. That he *went* to bed last night with Ice, but it hadn't been his Ice. Had it?

"Tell me something about the future."

"We're happy. We have a good life."

"I look forward to it."

1986. Goose. 2016. Ice. Two futures diverged in a creamy orange sky, sorry he couldn't travel both. Guilt, and grief, and love, and Ice, and Ice, and Ice.

He'd be hyperventilating if he could make himself take in any air at all. It can't have been a dream. It had felt *way* too real to be a dream. And yet…

This is his house, his and Ice's. Maverick's leather jacket is slung on the back of the armchair near the TV, and the coffee table boasts (along with two of their five cats) a few books and a bowl for the TV remotes and — Maverick's heart aches — a bottle of water and the Advil jar. The blinds behind the couch are shut, the sun peeking through the slats and illuminating the cream-colored rug. Maverick's phone, also on the coffee table, buzzes to life with a text message from Carole. It's in the group chat she has with him and Ice. She's asking what kind of bagels they want her to pick up.

It's a quarter to nine. He has eleven new text messages, an ESPN notification, and two Facebook friend requests. His lock screen is a photo from his wedding day, his and Ice's first dance as husbands.

He's fifty-four years old. He's married to Iceman Kazansky.

The date is July 30, 2016.

In the kitchen, he hears the click of the electric kettle, and the refrigerator door closing, and soft footsteps across the tiles. Maverick's on his feet before he even remembers standing up, and SR-71 flicks her tail at him as if to say, *Go get him.*

Ice is sitting at the kitchen table with his hands wrapped around a mug of tea when Maverick bursts in. He seems almost as stunned by Maverick's sudden appearance as Maverick is by his presence. "Hey," he says, and rubs his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Sorry, did I wake you?"

Maverick can't speak. Ice's hair is rumpled like he's been running his hands through it, and he's wearing a gray shirt with the TOPGUN logo emblazoned on the chest and those stupid pinstriped pajama pants that are part of the set Maverick bought him as a gag gift for Christmas a few years ago, the ones that look like they should be owned by old people and chartered accountants and rich people with monogrammed velvet bathrobes. Maverick has a matching set, somewhere, and even though he's *far* from the age range that these pajamas are for, he secretly loves them and loves seeing Ice in them. Loves the idea that they'll still be together as the old men that these pajamas are made for.

Till death do us part.

"Mav?" Ice looks worried. "Are you okay? Did you take the ibuprofen?"

Maverick isn't sure when the tears started forming, if it had been between the Advil or the water bottle or Ice's pajama pants or the wedding ring back on his hand where it belongs or even the red knitted blanket that he knows spends most of the time in the guest room's linen closet, but the concern lining Ice's face is enough to shake them loose — and the next thing he knows he's crossing the room and Ice is standing up and Maverick is finally, *finally,* back in his husband's arms.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Ice, I'm so sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, Mav—"

"Yes I do. God, you know that I — fuck, you're *everything* to me, Ice. I'd…" *I'd rewrite time for you,* he almost says, before he remembers that he actually had.

It was a dream, though. Wasn't it?

Ice has drawn back now, using the pad of his thumb to brush away one of Maverick's tears just like he had last night — no, not last night, in his dream. Up close, Maverick can see the strands of gray in his hair, the smile lines around his eyes. He really is just as beautiful now

as he was at twenty-six. Still beautiful. Always beautiful. “You weren’t wrong,” he’s saying, and Maverick blinks, because yes he was, hadn’t Ice heard him apologize? “I’m not Goose. I’ll never be what he was to you.”

“I know,” Maverick says, and then wishes he could kick himself in the shin. The last thing he wants is to fuck this up again. He needs to get the words out right this time. “No, I didn’t mean — look, Goose was my best friend. He was the first person who ever really saw me.” Ice nods, because Maverick has told him all of this before. “And I’ll always miss him, always love him, but you…you’re my husband. My wingman. Goose could never be what you are to me either.” He takes Ice’s hands in his own and places them over his heart, which constricts at the look on Ice’s face, the way his eyes have gone shiny. “I shouldn’t have said it to you like that. I was upset, I was drunk, I wasn’t thinking clearly — I don’t have a good excuse, but I swear I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m sorry.”

Ice kisses him lightly on the nose — an absolution that makes tears spring to Maverick’s eyes all over again. “Thank you,” he says, soft but serious, and draws him back into an embrace. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” And *God,* Maverick has never been happier to say it in reply, to be able to say it in general. Never been happier that he doesn’t have to relive the last thirty years of his life praying that Ice will choose to take the time to know him and love him again.

“Always,” Ice whispers, and Maverick startles.

“You…chose your future with me, over…”

“Yes. Yes. Always.”

“Why did you say that?”

“I don’t know,” Ice admits after a moment’s pause, and breathes a laugh that ruffles Maverick's hair. “Just…felt right, I guess.”

Maverick’s heart is pounding.

It could be a coincidence — it probably *is* a coincidence, it’s not like he invented the word — but now, suddenly, desperately, he needs to know the truth.

He takes Ice by the hand and leads him back into the living room, letting him go only when he arrives at their bookcase. Familiar titles and the spines of photo albums leap out at him, but he ignores them all in favor of the now-battered edition of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court.* His hand trembles as he reaches up to take it from the shelf; he feels like he’s torn between two different worlds, one foot in a dream and the other in reality.

SR-71 meows from the coffee table, and Maverick forces himself to take the plunge. He opens the book, flipping all the way to the back — and inhales sharply.

The ink has faded and the pages have yellowed over the years, but the words (and sentiment) are as plain as the day he wrote them. *You’re worth any risk, Ice.*

“Mav?”

Maverick can feel Ice looking at the book over his shoulder, and leans back into him slightly — mostly so he won’t fall down. “Who wrote this?” he manages to ask, and can hear Ice’s frown almost as well as he can hear the tremble in his own voice.

“Mark Twain.”

“No, Kazansky, I meant *this.”* Maverick taps the thirty year old scrawl for emphasis.

“Oh. I don’t know, that was written there when I got it. Always thought Slider wrote that as a joke or something.”

As a joke. And he thought Slider had written it. *Slider.*

Maverick can’t even help the laugh that tears free of him, watery and full of the same overwhelming hysteria that had plagued him for four days, and doesn’t stop himself when that laugh becomes another, and another, and then another. He laughs so hard, he cries.

The pain of losing Goose is as fresh and raw (and familiar) as ever, but fuck is he glad that he hadn’t lost Ice too. Between what he has and what could be, he’ll pick the former — and everything and everyone that goes with it — every time.

“Mitchell.” Ice moves to stand in front of him again. The furrow between his brows is more pronounced than ever. Maverick wants to kiss him there, and he impulsively grabs Ice’s face and leans up on his tiptoes to do just that. Ice doesn’t even seem fazed. “Hey, talk to me. Are you okay?”

“You’ll be okay, Mav.”

Maverick just laughs and wipes away the last of his tears before hugging Ice again, just because he can. Ice hugs back automatically, clearly perplexed, and Maverick melts into his touch, breathing him in.

You deserve somebody who makes you happy just being near them, Goose had said. Who could have guessed, the things a wished-for day with your best friend could remind you the importance of.

“I’m okay,” he says at last, meaning every word. And then, *“Fuck,* Ice, do I have a story for you.”

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